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Religious Faculty Members View Their Jobs

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RELIGIOUS FACULTY MEMBERS VIEW THEIR JOBS

By Ruth E. Eckert and John E. Stecklein*

ALTHOUGH ROMAN CATHOLIC COLLEGES differ somewhat in objectives and program from other types of higher institutions, their most distinctive difference probably lies in their development and continued sponsorship by religious orders. Because these orders serve as major sources for the supply of teachers in Catholic colleges, it is important to know how members assigned to college teaching duties look upon these tasks. What factors do they think may have influenced their assignment to college work, and how did they prepare for such service? What is the nature of their present jobs? What satisfactions do they experience from their academic service, and what proposals do they make for recruiting the great numbers of religious and lay faculty members needed for ever rising college enrollments?

A recent study of Minnesota college faculty members, which involved the staffs of seven Roman Catholic colleges as well as of twenty-five other higher educational institutions, provides an interesting picture of faculty motivations and attitudes. Of the 288 members of religious orders who were teaching in the Roman Catholic colleges at the time of the study, 61 of the 69 included in the sample filled out and returned a four-page printed questionnaire. This same form was also completed by 645 lay teachers in their own and other Minnesota colleges.[1] Five sisters and three priests were interviewed later, as were seventy-nine other randomly chosen teachers in the various colleges. Although the samples used in this study were not large, the care exercised in collecting the data justifies some comparison of the responses made by religious and lay faculty members.

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[1] These 706 persons represented a 94 per cent return of questionaires sent to a 25 per cent stratified random sample of the full-time academic staff in 32 Minnesota colleges. For more complete information regarding the general plan of the study and preliminary findings, see John E. Stecklein and Ruth E. Eckert, *An Exploratory Study of Factors Influencing the Choice of College Teaching as a Career,* Bureau of Institutional Research, University of Minnesota, 1958. This study was conducted under a grant from the United States Office of Education's Cooperative Research Program.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

Like their lay colleagues in their own and other four-year colleges, most of the religious faculty members had grown up in homes of modest circumstances, where the father typically held a semi-skilled, farming or sales job. Only 3 per cent of the fathers held professional jobs, as contrasted with 24 per cent for the lay group. Both parents usually had less than a high-school education, with the figures for the religious faculty significantly below those for the lay group (61 per cent of the fathers and 59 per cent of the mothers of those who entered religious orders had not gone beyond the elementary school, as compared with 36 and 34 per cents, respectively, for the lay teachers).[2] But the replies suggested that these parents had often been deeply religious people, who wanted their sons and daughters to gain a better education and to serve God more effectively than they had. Close relatives who had entered religious orders had also influenced some of these faculty members to do so, and especially to prepare for a teaching ministry.

Almost half (48 per cent) of the religious faculty were natives of Minnesota, as compared with 28 per cent of the other teachers, with correspondingly less representation from distant places, notably the Northeast and South. The median ages for the two groups were about the same (45 and 43 years respectively). But a significantly higher proportion of the religious than of the lay faculty (56 *vs.* 41 per cents) had been elementary- or high-school teachers before taking their college posts. Although a few felt that their period of service in the lower schools had perhaps been too long, they strongly advocated some experiences of this type for prospective college teachers. As one sister, who was teaching physics, stated the case:

> High-school teaching gives one a better understanding of what the background of a particular college class is, for the teacher knows what students were taught in high school.[3]

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[2] All differences reported, unless indicated as "slight," satisfy the .05 level of confidence, and where the term "significant" is used, they meet the .01 criterion.

[3] All quotations are from the questionnaires or interviews with members of religious orders.

ENTRY TO COLLEGE TEACHING

About two-fifths of these faculty members — both religious and lay — had considered the possibility of a career in college teaching while they were still undergraduates, although definite decisions usually were not made until years later. In general, faculty members said that they had looked upon college teaching as quite remote from their own lives:

> I felt that I could not aspire to this. . . . In fact, I did not even dare dream of such a thing.
>
> An instructor at St. ..... 's had earlier suggested college teaching, but I just didn't have the money for the education necessary to do college teaching.

Like the much larger number who looked forward to teaching in the lower schools, these persons often noted appreciatively the influence that teachers, superiors, and college administrators had had on their plans to become teachers:

> A high school teacher of English probably encouraged me more than anyone else to become a teacher.
>
> A brother I had in my first year of high school was influential in my making this decision.
>
> Ending up in college teaching was really due to the fact that there were so many guiding hands all the way down the line, as it were. . . . I was encouraged while still an undergraduate by Mother-General to become a teacher, and my first teaching position was with a person of superior intellectual capacity, who gave me every opportunity to learn as much as I could about teaching. . . . I would never have aspired to college teaching had it not been for the encouragement of these people.

In addition to these external influences, faculty members in all colleges cited many personal interests or concerns that had helped to shape their vocational choice. Considering the fact that a religious teacher's first duty is to his or her order, it was interesting, though not surprising, that religious staff members made little mention of the prestige or security of college jobs, the favorable working conditions, or the opportunity for a collegiate academic and social life, as factors attracting them to the college teaching pro-

fession. They also placed significantly less stress than did their lay colleagues on the possibilities that this career offered to do research. Instead, their chief motivations in becoming college teachers seemed to lie in the opportunities afforded to promote the growth of young people and to contribute to society. In other words, their primary motivation seemed to be service to others, and through them to the Kingdom of Christ.

Many had made excellent records as undergraduates, with almost half of the religious faculty reporting honors received at graduation or other academic distinctions, which was about the same proportion found for the lay faculty. Only one religious faculty member reported election to Phi Beta Kappa, as compared with 9 per cent of their lay colleagues, possibly because there were no chapters in the colleges that these religious faculty members attended.

About two-fifths of the religious teachers, as of the lay faculty, had already earned their doctorates, and another fourth had taken some work beyond the master's degree but had not completed a doctoral program. Seldom were their baccalaureate and advanced degrees from the same institution, suggesting a greater spread in educational experiences than was true for the lay faculty (5 *vs.* 27 per cent reported all degrees from the same college or university). Whereas among lay faculty many more men than women held the doctorate (52 and 28 per cents respectively), the percentages were very similar for the religious faculty (39 and 37 per cents respectively).

CURRENT ACTIVITIES

Since the study was initially restricted to faculty members who did some teaching, it was not surprising to find that almost two-thirds of the working time of these persons — both religious and lay — was spent in the classroom or in preparing for teaching. They also typically gave another 10 to 15 per cent of their time to other student services, including counseling individual students and advising student organizations. Committee services within the college and consultant aid to groups beyond the campus also typically consumed a few hours each week, although less of the latter service was reported by religious than lay faculty members.

Faculty members in all types of colleges devoted little time to research and scholarly writing, but the situation was especially acute

for religious faculty, perhaps because their services of prayer and worship also claimed several hours a day. Three-fifths (61 per cent) of these persons, as contrasted with 42 per cent of the lay teachers, said that they had no time available for scholarly activities, and religious faculty members who managed to do some type of research or writing spent significantly less time on such activities (usually less than 10 per cent of their total working hours) than their lay colleagues did.

APPRAISALS OF COLLEGE TEACHING AS A CAREER

Evident in the questionnaire replies, but especially so in the interviews, was the strong religious dedication of these people. Beyond all else they viewed their work as a service to God, and this made even excessively long and dull tasks bearable. But they also experienced other satisfactions, chiefly centering in their contacts with students and colleagues. Thus they gave significantly more emphasis than their lay colleagues to such reasons as "like to help young people" and "covet the opportunity to observe the growth and success of young people."

> I enjoy teaching new ideas in literature, and watching students respond to these ideas. . . . I also find other faculty members' interest in learning a source of joy.
>
> I like to watch the maturing and general development of students from a spiritual as well as an intellectual point of view.
>
> I feel that I am making a contribution to the lives of my students in a social, personal, and religious way.
>
> I like to see freshmen, sometimes with tremendous prejudices, mellow and be more philosophical about things as they get more information and understand more about the world and their responsibilities.

In contrast, they made little or no mention of a number of satisfactions that figured prominently in the lay faculty's replies. Only half as many religious as lay teachers mentioned "colleagues and associates" as a major source of satisfaction, and none cited opportunities to do research, to attend professional meetings, to live in an academic environment, or to enjoy the freedom and independence associated with college teaching.

The dissatisfactions that religious faculty members expressed were many fewer than those specified by lay faculty, chiefly because they were not harassed by the low pay and uncertainties regarding tenure and advancement that plagued many of their lay colleagues. Their concerns instead centered around excessive work loads, the number of routine tasks they had to do, and limited opportunities for continued study and specialization in their chosen fields. The following comments are typical of those received from religious faculty members:

> It seems to me that I am always going to committee meetings of one sort or another . . . and this crowds out opportunities for study.
>
> I need more time for research. . . . So much time is needed to correct papers and to counsel students that might be profitably spent on other things.
>
> I haven't written anything for many years, for I just don't have the time to prepare anything that I would be satisfied with.
>
> I am spreading my efforts too thin. . . . I have had to prepare for nine different courses during the past two years, and feel that I have no real area of specialization.

Given an opportunity to reafirm their earlier assignment or decision to teach in college, more than four-fifths of both the religious and the lay faculty said that they would want to continue in college teaching. The remaining persons were usually uncertain of what they would do, should another suitable opening be suggested. Only one person in fifty, among both the religious and lay faculty members, said that he would definitely prefer to be doing something else. The same strong endorsement of college teaching came on general ratings made of this career choice, where 62 per cent of the religious faculty, as compared with 49 per cent of the lay group, said that they were "very satisfied" with this career, and most of the remainder gave "satisfied" ratings.

RECRUITING AND RETAINING COLLEGE TEACHERS

Because Roman Catholic colleges, like other higher institutions, will need many thousands of new faculty members to replace those who resign or retire and to build the larger staffs required for swell-

ing enrollments, suggestions were solicited concerning ways in which college staffs might be enlarged and strengthened. Religious and lay faculty members gave rather similar suggestions, except that the religious teachers placed much less stress on salary increases and other measures for increasing job security. In contrast, they seemed more alert than other faculty members to the need for early identification of promising candidates, and for active encouragement of such persons to become college teachers. Representative comments included the following:

> Students don't hear about opportunities in college teaching until they get to college, and by then their hearts and minds may be set on something else. . . . The profession ought to use the radio, TV, popular journals, and the like to play up the campus life of both the professor and the student.
>
> The education department of the college should bring the need for teachers — including college teachers — to the attention of students. Perhaps colleges should also publish pamphlets and send faculty members out to talk with youngsters in high school and maybe even in grade school about such careers.
>
> Prospective college teachers should get as much general and liberal education as possible. They should also teach in a high school that includes both boys and girls.
>
> There should be increased observance and study of the younger members of the order before they are ordained, to try to identify those who might be good as teachers.

Religious faculty members also made valuable suggestions as to how good teachers could be held on college staffs, once they had been recruited and trained for such work. Again there was the expected difference in the general patterning of responses, with less mention of material rewards and more of active encouragement and aid in becoming superior teachers:

> I think it is a good idea for college teachers to go to other schools as exchange staff members, and some of this is being done in our order, mostly in summer time. . . . This gives a healthy new attitude to the ones who are exchanged, and keeps them from getting into too much of a rut in their teaching.

> I feel that priest-teachers particularly need sabbatical leaves to learn what goes on outside the walls of the colleges, and I would favor exchange professorships for this reason.
>
> Our college is just beginning some in-service training of staff, with weekly or monthly meetings in two departments to talk over courses and methods of instruction. . . . This will help to develop and hold good teachers.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study of religious faculty members has revealed several kinds of information that may be useful in the future staffing of Catholic colleges:

1. Members of religious orders are evidently recruited or assigned to college faculties because of their interest in teaching, which they view as a calling of deep religious and social significance. The fact that this sense of mission was often nurtured by parents or teachers suggests the important role that these individuals can play in the future staffing of these programs.
2. Many sisters and priests join college staffs quite late, after years of service in the lower schools or in other educational assignments. Although "it may be ideal," as one sister phrased it, "to have instructors work their way up," this process might be speeded up to provide colleges more quickly with qualified teachers.
3. Their major efforts are concentrated on teaching and other direct services to students. This often crowds out opportunities for scholarly reading and research activities that would strengthen their instruction and bring greater academic distinction to the colleges involved. Some appraisal of the use of staff time would seem indicated, with the view to nurturing deeper scholarly interests among both faculty members and students.
4. Religious faculty members find their greatest professional satisfactions in the intellectual and spiritual growth of their students and are proud to be identified with this effort. Their dissatisfactions, which center chiefly around excessive work loads that crowd out time for study and reflection, could be remedied by the provision of more faculty members and especially of more secretarial and clerical help for their tasks.

5. These persons seem eager to build a strong profession, and advocate early identification and encouragement of individuals qualified for such service. They also suggest that new faculty members be given more orientation to their tasks as college teachers, and that experienced persons be granted leaves and exchange professorships that might broaden the outlook of religious faculty on college problems.

The present study has thrown light on the motivations, values, and interests of religious faculty members, and on the satisfactions that they derive from service on a college staff. Such knowledge should be helpful in recruiting and preparing thousands of able and dedicated young people for college teaching careers; it may also aid in developing the intellectual climate and conditions of service favorable to their highest performance.